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The characters of *Animalia*, Malia Jensen's show of recent work at the Portland Institute of Contemporary Art, inhabit the ambivalent space of the fairy tale where social codes mask a pervasive sexuality. Capitalizing on our uneasy relationship with the natural world, Jensen has assembled a cast of gentle woodland creatures immobilized by choices or mutely aware of their inescapable natures. These allegories about carnality, progress and gender roles are pitched from a thankfully unfeminine—yet definitely female—point of view. Do what we might to place ourselves above our animal friends, we are, like them, "stuck in our own natures." But just how the story gets told depends not a little on who does the telling.

At the entrance to the exhibit is *Mr. & Mrs. Grouse*, a life-size rendition of the game birds bowing and pecking companionably on a shelf. The title recalls the way children's stories not only anthropomorphize the animal world, but also slather everything over with a veneer of respectability. These are not just any pair of birds doing what birds do, but next-door neighbors of the Little Red Hen. Except in this instance, they have been fashioned carefully out of cow dung. No substance could be more natural, yet few are less socially acceptable as objects of contemplation.

Mr. & Mrs. Grouse provides a key to Jensen's strategy for constructing meaning. Jensen chooses materials as much for their cultural associations as for their formal power and juxtaposes those with titles that discourage simple readings. Take *Vulpes Fulva Fulva*, a sly sound-play (Latin for "red fox") in which the central animal has been cast out of fiberglass and finished by an auto body shop to a champagne-colored luster. The bewildered animal confronts a forked path of red wax flower petals vague enough in shape to either resemble tongues, female genitalia or maybe even drops of blood.

According to Jensen, "the fox has in front of it an array of sexual options, questions of vulnerability and indulgence, relationships to beauty and narcissism." But the paths branching off in a significant "V" are identical; there is no basis on which to make a choice.

Gender confusion animates the pair of oversize humping ladybugs entitled *En Plein Air (Ladybugs)*. Cast in pristine plastic, these white on white creatures caught in the act have been so literally sanitized that they nearly disappear. Equally quiet, but without a shred of sexual doubt, is the seductive assortment of wallets and change purses cast out of soap—a material that vanishes with use. Arrayed on a shelf against the gallery's back wall and displaying all the details of their well-used originals, they are intimate repositories that evoke the origami of female anatomy.

Also cast of soap, the nearby *Skunk Takes a Bath* catches the animal in a meditative pause. The resigned hunch of his shoulders as he pulls himself up from a turquoise pool suggests a moment of clarity in which he sadly realizes that no amount of bathing will rid him of his essential nature. *Spring Tree*, on the other hand, a walnut trunk oozing electrical wires instead of sap and illuminated by blossoming halogen lights, strives to maintain its "treeness" in the face of that overpowering human intervention called progress. Yet despite its truncation, the weathered surface of its silvery bark reminds us of the kinship among all things biological.

Billed as the exhibit's centerpiece, *Beaver Story* is a giant model of Oregon's state animal fashioned out of rough slices of layered plywood. Jensen confesses to being

obsessed with this icon of the region, “the original logger,” ever since she learned that prehistoric beavers commonly grew to over eight feet tall. This monument to that earlier glory sets us wondering about our own evolutionary fate, while inviting a series of word plays that, in the context of the other work, naturally includes the sexual slang. Given the hegemony of the phallic, can anyone blame Jensen for asking “is bigger better for a beaver?” The answer, however, is obviously not, for survival required a considerable scaling down. Meanwhile, outside PICA’s new Pearl District home, those other builders, stuck in their own essential natures, scurry about the area’s vacant lots busily filling every empty space.

Despite its size, Beaver Story resonates less than Skunk, the change purses or Spring Tree. Yet, taken together, the separate pieces of Jensen’s Animalia hold each other in a playful tension, well suited to what the show’s curator and PICA director Kristy Edmunds calls “our ongoing conflicts with the most primal of issues.”

ADDED MATERIAL

Pat Boas is an artist and writer based in Portland.

Malia Jensen: Animalia through September 17 at the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, 219 NW 12th Ave., Suite 100, Portland.

Malia Jensen, Spring Tree, 1999, walnut trunk, sockets, wire, bulbs, 91" × 48", at the Portland Institute of Contemporary Art. (Photo: John Valls.)